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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001097

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/15/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PROTESTS MOVE TO DIGHOMI; MOIA ADMITS SERIOUS MISTAKE SEIZING CAMERAS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment. On June 15, after a demoralizing weekend for protest leaders in which the USG and other members of the diplomatic community condemned June 12 attacks by protesters against members of parliament, protesters who had taken part in the attacks dared police to come and get them, both on cable TV and with bullhorns at a police station in Dighomi where five protesters arrested June 12 were being held. It appears that police reacted harshly in an incident at the Dighomi Police Station by forcibly dispersing demonstrators; during the incident approximately 30 protesters were detained and some were injured. The Ambassador immediately called about the incident to Speaker Bakradze and Deputy Foreign Minister Bokeria and asked for an explanation. The government privately acknowledged the poor handling of the situation by the police and will publicly apologize for seizing equipment from press on the scene in Dighomi. Protest leaders were reportedly meeting at the end of the day to review next steps and called a meeting with the diplomatic corps to express concern. It appears that the government has over-reacted to the baiting of the protesters and the actions of the protesters may have been a desperate effort to provoke an incident just as the protests appeared to be drawing to an end. End summary and comment.

Protesters at Dighomi Police Station

¶2. (C) Following the weekend's events at the Parliament (reported septel), protesters on June 15 went to the Dighomi Police Station to call for the release of those being held in connection with the attacks on Parliamentarians on June 12. The press reported, and protest leaders have told poloffs, that police attacked the June 15 crowd and seized media cameras. Deputy FM Giga Bokeria told the Ambassador that the police took action against protesters only when they realized that four individuals who had taken part in the June 12 attacks were among the group -- and it was in their attempt to apprehend those individuals that a scuffle between police and protesters occurred. Bokeria said that 30 people were being detained at the Dighomi Police station; most would likely be quickly released (probably with a fine) although the four individuals sought for their actions June 12 would likely be held administratively for 25 days.

¶3. (C) Following the incident, Poloff met with representatives of the Republican Party, including David Usupashvili, for their version of the day's events. Usupashvili said that protesters arrived at the Dighomi Police Station at approximately 1415 and they began calling to the police with a bullhorn to arrest them (as participants in the June 12 attacks). Bokeria confirmed this and said that the police went into the crowd to detain the known assailants from the 12th. Bokeria said that four of those arrested had been on opposition-leaning Maestro television over the weekend, goading the police to come and arrest them live on the air.

¶4. (C) The Republicans reported that Alasania ally Zurab Abashidze had been hospitalized due to a beating by the police and Usupashvili noted that the Ombudsman had been denied access to the police station, a violation of Georgian law (Note: Georgian law states that the Ombudsman is to be admitted without delay to any police station or prisoner upon request. But the Ombudsman and his deputy are not currently in Georgia, so it is not clear to whom the access was denied). As of 1830 on June 15, the crowd on Rustaveli remained small, around 200, and appeared uninterested or unaware of the day's events. Non-parliamentary opposition leaders were reportedly meeting to discuss strategy and scheduled a briefing for the diplomatic corps at 8 pm June ¶15.

Official Government Response Forthcoming

¶5. (C) In order to address the situation directly, Bokeria told the Ambassador that Deputy Minister of the Interior Eka Zguladze would brief the Georgian people live on television. She planned to clarify the day's events and would officially apologize to the press whose cameras had been wrongfully seized. She will reportedly call police actions against the media a "serious mistake" and will ensure that all equipment is returned to the rightful owners.

¶6. (C) Post has registered a request with the government to view any tapes of the events in Dighomi on June 15 as soon as any footage is available. In a separate meeting with Emboffs on June 15, MOIA official Shota Utiashvili said that the government, in a plan approved by MOIA Minister Merabishvili, was prepared to offer amnesty to those charged with crimes

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during the past two months of protests. The plan preceded the events of June 15 so how this offer will be communicated is unclear.

TEFFT